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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the major difficulties experienced and perceived by students of Chinese as an additional language (CAL), as well as the coping strategies they employed. It is a qualitative, 8-week case study that attempts to provide descriptions and analyses of a particular group of learners' learning difficulties and their coping strategies within specific contexts. Data include classroom observations, tape recordings, questionnaires, and formal interviews with students. Major questions addressed are twofold: What are the major difficulties in learning CAL, and how do difficulties differ among the learners? How do learners cope with their difficulties and how varied are the strategies among them? It is concluded that depending on the number of variables, different students may experience a variety of difficulties in learning CAL and adopt different coping strategies for the same difficulty. An awareness of this may help the teacher diagnose the students' language learning difficulties more effectively and accordingly provide more effective instruction. Two research questions arise from this study: What are the real obstacles that prevent students from overcoming difficulties no matter how hard they try? Are there any strategies in addition to the ones adopted by the students in this study that can help others overcome their difficulties more efficiently? Thirty-five references and two appendices (the student questionnaire and interview guidelines) are included. (KFT)

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STUDENTS' MAJOR DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING MANDARIN CHINESE AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE AND THEIR COPING STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This study investigates the major difficulties experienced and perceived, and coping strategies employed, by students of Chinese as an additional language (CAL) beyond the initial learning stages. It is a qualitative, eight-week case study that attempts to provide descriptions and analysis of a particular group of learners' learning difficulties and their coping strategies within their specific contexts. Data include classroom observations, tape recording, questionnaire, and formal interview with the students. Major questions addressed are: What are the major difficulties in learning CAL and how do difficulties differ among different learners? How do the learners cope with their difficulties and do different learners adopt different coping strategies? The results of the study indicate that depending on a number of variables, different students may experience different difficulties in learning CAL and adopt different coping strategies for even the same difficulty. Limitations and pedagogical implications of the study are discussed. Questions are raised for further studies.

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STUDENTS' MAJOR DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING MANDARIN CHINESE AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE AND THEIR COPING STRATEGIES

Second language learners vary on a number of dimensions when learning the same L2 (Ellis, 1985:99). Learners from different language backgrounds, with different personalities, motivations, learning styles, and learning purposes, may face different difficulties and adopt different strategies to cope with these difficulties. What are students' major difficulties in learning Chinese as an additional language (CAL) at proficiency level beyond the initial stages? How do students cope with their difficulties in the learning process? With a rapid growth in enrollment in CAL courses and more and more educational institutes starting programs of CAL in North America (Standards, 1996; McGinnis, 1996), students will increasingly go beyond the initial learning stages. Pedagogically, an understanding of students' major difficulties beyond initial stages and their coping strategies may enable a CAL teacher to be aware of the reasons behind some seemingly stubborn learning problems and thus intentionally adjust instruction to facilitate learning more effectively.

Many research studies have addressed the issue of difficulties in learning an additional language from various perspectives (e.g., Moisio *et al*, 1976; Fletcher, 1983; Elkhatib, 1984; Sparks, 1995; Sparks *et al*, 1998; Ganschow *et al*, 1998, etc.). With regards to CAL learning, most of the studies examine the difficulties students encounter and many focus on the learners at the relatively initial learning stages. For instance, two studies conducted by Ke are in the area of learning Chinese characters. One was on the effects of language background on the learning of Chinese Characters using subjects with one academic year of Chinese learning experience (Ke, 1998). The other investigated first-year Chinese programs to study the relationship between Chinese character recognition and production (Ke, 1996). In the area of mastering Chinese pronunciation, McGinnis (1997) compared the effectiveness of using tonal spelling with that of using diacritics for teaching pronunciation to students enrolled in the first year Chinese course. To investigate the relationship between naming and knowing, Everson (1998) conducted a study

with beginning learners. While there exist studies focusing on learners at the intermediate and advanced levels such as Everson's study on reading strategies (Everson, 1997), Sergent & Everson's (1992) study on character recognition, and Wen's study on motivations (Wen, 1997), the topic of coping strategies employed by students facing difficulties remains an area relatively unexplored. In addition, the difficulties presented in available studies are mostly those observed by the researchers. The present study intends to include learners' perspectives and address the issue in terms of both difficulties and coping strategies.

REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

Existing studies of learning difficulties faced by CAL students can be categorized into several areas: character learning, including recognition and production; pronunciation, including tones; and comprehension, including reading strategies, naming and knowing. Chinese character learning is the area that seems to have received most attention from different researchers. Extensive studies were conducted to address the issue of character recognition in terms of strategies (Hayes, 1988; McGinnis, 1995), the relationship between character complexity and character recognition (Hayes, 1987), word length and memorability (Hayes, 1990), and effects of frequency and density on recognition (Sergent & Everson, 1992). Comparing recognition and production, Ke's (1996) study of first-year Chinese as a foreign language students at four American universities reveals that character production is a more difficult task than character recognition. This finding is consistent with Chin's (1973). While both Ke and Chin have addressed the issue from the perspective of curriculum design questioning high expectations for character writing at the initial learning stages, Packard's study (1990), considering that learning characters may be the most daunting task for students accustomed to phonetic writing, was conducted to investigate whether there is an optimum time to introduce characters into the beginning Chinese language curriculum. The effects of specific language backgrounds on the learning of characters were also investigated (Ke, 1998). In Ke's study where heritage and non-heritage learners are compared, it was found out that language background did not have a significant effect on learners' character learning. The learning of characters has also been investigated from the perspective of students' attitudes. The finding of McGinnis' study (1995) reveals a relationship between students' attitudes and character production. So far, studies on

difficulties in learning written Chinese seem to be limited to character learning. Writing in Chinese remains an area untouched.

Studies on pronunciation mainly focus on the teaching of tones, probably due to the fact that one salient distinction between English and Chinese is that Chinese is a tonal language, and thus confronts the learners with extra difficulties. One issue drawing attention is whether tonal spelling or diacritics is more effective for teaching pronunciation. While there are existing CFL textbooks advocating tonal spelling (i.e., GR: gwoyeu romatzyh), research evidence seems to support the use of diacritics for more accurate production of tones while reading a piece of text in Chinese romanization (McGinnis, 1997; Shen, 1989; Everson, 1988). These studies throw light on new directions in teaching tones; however, they remain silent on using tones effectively for oral communication.

A number of studies of reading comprehension have come from Everson and Ke (Everson, 1986, 1988, 1996; Everson & Ke, 1997), and they mostly deal with reading strategies. One of the findings is that when facing more difficult characters for comprehension, students tend to rely on their spoken language skills for remembering the meaning of these characters (Everson, 1996).

While existing studies have revealed some aspects of the difficulties encountered by CAL students and contributed to our understanding of the CAL learning process, the findings relate mostly to difficulties that are based on observations from the researchers' perspectives. However, students' perceptions of learning difficulties may affect their decisions about choosing specific coping strategies that may have an impact on how successfully a difficulty is overcome. Thus, it is important to include students' perceptions when addressing the issue.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study intends to investigate the major difficulties experienced and perceived by students at the level beyond the initial stages and coping strategies employed by them. The specific research questions are:

1. What are the major difficulties in learning Mandarin Chinese as an additional language and what are the differences in difficulties among different learners?
2. How do the learners cope with their difficulties? Do different learners adopt different coping strategies?

The learning difficulties identified in the study refer to those both perceived by the learners and observed by the researcher. Though the data was collected quite some time ago, in light of the increasing interest in learning CAL, the answers to the questions are more relevant than ever in terms of providing potential pedagogical solutions to problems frequently encountered in the Chinese classroom.

METHOD

Qualitative Study

The study was a type of "exploratory or discovery-oriented research" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989:383) that examined "a topic in which there has been little previous research" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989:423). This study does not intend to outline the entire range of difficulties facing all CAL learners. Instead, it attempts to provide descriptions and analysis of a particular group of students' difficulties and coping strategies "within their specific contexts" (Wiersma, 1986:233). Interviewing was used as the main method to uncover students' perspectives on the major difficulties the learners encountered, and the strategies they adopted to cope with them. In order to assure the reliability of the interview, other methods including classroom observation, questionnaire, and tape recording were also adopted. First, the students' difficulties were identified. Next, their strategies for coping with the difficulties were sought out. Finally, both the difficulties and the strategies were classified and analyzed according to several criteria. By focusing on one case, the researcher could manage to delve "in depth into complexities" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989:46) of the concerned issue. The following is a report on the research method in more detail.

Setting

The study was conducted at a university in the province of British Columbia in Canada.

At the time of the study, more than 10% of the population in the city was ethnic Chinese, and more and more new immigrants from Hong Kong were moving into the area. Many of these Cantonese speakers would like to learn Mandarin Chinese as an additional language for a number of reasons. At the university, approximately 300 students were enrolled in Chinese as an additional language classes at different levels. About 80% of the students were Cantonese speakers. The other 20% of the students spoke other languages as their first languages. On campus, there were about 300 Chinese students or visiting scholars studying or researching at the university. Most of them spoke Mandarin Chinese as the main medium of communication among themselves. As a result, it was not very difficult for a Chinese learner to find a native speaker of Chinese to talk with.

Participants

The participants were fifteen university students enrolled in Chinese 302, a one-semester course for intermediate to advanced learners. Though the students with a strong background in Chinese may have higher proficiency for reading and writing in the Chinese language, all enrolled in the course have reached certain proficiency level perceived by the university as being intermediate to advanced in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Since the background of the participants is very important to this particular study (on difficulties in learning Mandarin and coping strategies), a more specific description of the participants is necessary. Table 1 provides general information about the background of the fifteen participants.

Student	**Age**	**Sex**	**First Language**	**Strongest Language**	**Chinese Major**
S1	24	F	English	English	yes
S2	24	M	English	English	
S3	26	M	English	English	yes
S4	19	F	Shanghai Dialect	English	
S5	20	M	N/A	English	yes
S6	28	M	Malaysian	English	yes
S7	19	F	Cantonese	Cantonese	
S8	N/A	F	Cantonese	Cantonese	
S9	N/A	F	Cantonese	Cantonese	
S10	18	F	Cantonese	Cantonese	
S11	19	F	Cantonese	Cantonese	

S12	23	F	Cantonese	Cantonese	yes
S13	23	F	Cantonese	Cantonese	
S14	N/A	F	Cantonese	Cantonese	
S15	22	F	Cantonese	Cantonese	

Table 1: Personal Information on the participants.

The participants are four males and eleven females aged 18 to 28, each of whom is strongly motivated to study Chinese. Only five are Chinese majors. Though English is the native language of only three students, six students are most proficient in English, because they came to Canada at an early age and were schooled there. S7 to S15 came to Canada over the past few years as new immigrants, and Cantonese has been their medium of communication at home. Cantonese is both the native and primary language for these nine students.

Among the ten students with strong Cantonese and Shanghainese backgrounds, all of them feel a strong motivation to learn Mandarin Chinese, because they consider themselves ethnic Chinese, and Mandarin Chinese is the official language of China. In addition, eight of them would like to use Mandarin in their future careers. As for the other five (i.e., S1, S2, S3, S5, S6), four are Chinese majors. S2 is a Canadian with no Chinese background who is majoring in electrical engineering. For him, learning Chinese is a favored pastime; he is fond of Chinese culture, and has a Chinese girlfriend. As a summary, all the fifteen students in this study had strong motivation to learn Chinese.

Data collection

Classroom observation. To become familiar with the students for future interview and to obtain first hand information on students' performance in using the Chinese language, the researcher, a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese with a background in linguistics and language education, observed and participated in a total of twenty-four Chinese 302 class meetings in eight weeks. There were eighteen students in this class. After four weeks of observation, it was decided that the fifteen regularly attending students were chosen as the participants of the study. The observation also revealed to the researcher the instructional organization of the course. The

course was very content-oriented, and focused on authentic use of the Chinese language: Chinese culture was introduced and studied at a deeper level through reading Chinese essays and prose, discussing current affairs, watching movies and documentaries, conducting formal oral debates on controversial issues, and expounding viewpoints in written compositions. Every week, there was one formal oral debate starting with a formal speech given by a student on a predetermined topic. Written compositions were usually assigned as homework. The course provided students with an opportunity for practicing both their oral and writing skills in the Chinese language at an advanced level.

Questionnaire. A questionnaire was developed for a preliminary study. The answers to the questionnaire provided some general picture about the language background of the participants, their reasons for studying Chinese, and the difficulties they were encountering. The selection of the difficulties listed in the questionnaire was based on both the course objectives and the researcher's direct observation of students' speech in class. The questionnaire was distributed four weeks after the researcher's observation visits to the class. Appendix 1 is a sample of the questionnaire given to the participants.

Tape recording. Seven lessons were tape recorded for further analysis of the students' oral Mandarin in order to assess the reliability of what the participants reported in the questionnaire and the interview.

Interview. At the end of the eight weeks' observation, ten students were interviewed on a voluntary basis. Appendix 2 is a guideline of the interview. It was constructed on the basis of the answers to the questionnaire and the researcher's classroom observations. The interview was conducted to obtain a deeper understanding of the students' learning difficulties and their coping strategies and to study the issue from the students' perspectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Major difficulties

Table 2 shows the findings from the questionnaire. The results of the study suggest that

different students encounter different difficulties. But age and sex do not seem to correlate with learning difficulties. Major difficulties in the table are those listed as number one and number two difficulties by the students in the questionnaire (see Appendix 2 for reference).

				Types of Difficulties:								
Student	Age	Sex	Strongest Language	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
S1	24	F	English							*	*	
S2	24	F	English				*					
S3	26	M	English					*			*	
S4	19	F	English	*							*	
S5	20	M	English								*	
S6	28	F	English							*	*	
S7	19	M	Cantonese	*	*							
S8	N/A	F	Cantonese	*	*							
S9	N/A	F	Cantonese	*	*							
S10	18	F	Cantonese	*	*							
S11	19	F	Cantonese	*	*							
S12	23	F	Cantonese			*		*	*	*	*	
S13	23	F	Cantonese	*								
S14	N/A	F	Cantonese	*								
S15	22	F	Cantonese			*					*	

Note: 1. pronunciation; 2. tones; 3. grammar; 4. writing Chinese characters; 5. vocabulary building; 6. oral communication; 7. delivering a prepared oral presentation; 8. written compositions; 9. other.

Table 2. Difficulties the Students Encounter

Table 2 indicates that language background makes a great difference in the kinds of difficulties the students encounter. Among the students with a strong background in English, none of them reported tones as their major problem. As for pronunciation, only S4, who is a female student originally from Shanghai, considered it to be one of her top difficulties. But according to the researcher's classroom observation and the analysis of the tape recording of S4's speech in the class, S4 spoke Chinese with a nearly perfect pronunciation. Data collected through various methods reveals that none of the students with strong English backgrounds had major difficulties with tones and pronunciation. Instead, their main problem seemed to be with written composition.

In contrast, among the nine students with strong Cantonese backgrounds, seven (78%) reported pronunciation as one of the major problems, and five (56%) reported tones as a major problem. Data from the classroom observation and tape recording seems to confirm the students' judgments.

At first glance, it seems surprising that the students from an English speaking background with no knowledge of a tone language perceived little difficulty with tones while the students with a Cantonese background and a great familiarity with tones[1] did perceive having problems with tones. But this finding has just confirmed the SLA theory that differences between the native and target language are not tantamount to difficulties. (Ellis, 1985:31). In fact, interference appears to be more likely to occur when there is a certain degree of similarity between the learner's native and second language, or primary and target languages, as in the case of the present study (Ellis, 1985:34). Cantonese students' familiarity with tones in Cantonese seem to have caused confusion in mastering tones in Mandarin Chinese. Both Mandarin and Cantonese are tonal languages. The difference is that Mandarin has only four tones, while Cantonese has nine. So, in terms of tones, the two languages are not the same but similar. It is this similarity that seems to cause the learning difficulty. When discussing her problem with tones in an interview, one student remarked:

> "For us, since we know Cantonese already and we think, well, Mandarin is almost the same as Cantonese. So, what we're going to do is just to change the sound a little bit... I think, this is Mandarin. But, this doesn't make sense. Right now, I'm learning Japanese. I know nothing about Japanese. It's better, because I start with the basic things."

Indeed, for those students with a strong English background, the situation was much better in terms of tones because they started learning Mandarin "with the basic thing." This does not mean that they had never experienced problems with tones. In fact, among the four students with a strong background in English, three reported they did have difficulties with tones at the outset of their study of Mandarin. The mastery of tones was rendered problematic, neglected, or

[1] Cantonese is a tone language with nine tones.

both at the initial learning stages (McGinnis, 1997:228). However, unlike their Cantonese classmates, they finally overcame their problem with tones, which no longer seemed difficult to them.

The problems with pronunciation experienced by those students with a background in Cantonese seems also to be caused by the similarities between the students' native and the target languages. The main pronunciation problem for those students was that they did not distinguish the initial consonants *c, s, z* from the initials *ch*, *sh*, and *zh* in Mandarin speech. Yet, the problem did not seem to be caused by any lack of capability to produce these sounds. When being asked to generate these sounds by reading the Hanyu Pinyin, the romanization of Chinese characters, all the students succeeded. But when speaking in Mandarin or reading from a Chinese character text, they had trouble. Data from observations and tape recording show that they did not know which word or character should be pronounced as *sV*[2] and which should be *shV*. In Cantonese, there are no sounds like *ch*, *sh*, and *zh*. For instance, the Chinese tongue twister

1. *Xi shi si shi si shi si*[3] (*Xishi*[4] died when she was forty-four.).

is pronounced in Cantonese by the students as:

2. *Sai si sei si sei si sei.*

Notice that all the initial consonants in the Cantonese version are *s* instead of *s* and *sh*. When speaking the sentence in standard Mandarin Chinese, a Cantonese speaker has to change some of the *s* initials into *sh* and leave some others unchanged. But the sounds *s* and *sh* are somewhat similar and accordingly it was hard for those students with a strong background in Cantonese to remember which s initial should be changed into *sh*. As a result, when they had to pronounce the sentence in Mandarin, they just changed the vowels of each word. Instead of pronouncing it as in item 1 above, they tended to say:

1 1 3 2 4 2 4

3. *Xi si si si si si si.*

---

[2] V represents a vowel.

[3] For the sake of convenience, the tones are omitted in both sentence 1 and the following sentence 2, the Cantonese version.

[4] Xi shi is the name of a legendary beauty in ancient China.

After being told which syllable should start with *s* and which with *sh*, the students usually could pronounce the sentence correctly. But they quickly forgot the correct way to say it, because the significant overlap between Cantonese and Mandarin made them likely to become confused. For the students with a strong background in English, this problem did not exist. Forty and *sishi* are so different that it is almost impossible for the two items to become confused.

Written composition is another area viewed as difficult. A total of eight students (53%) reported they had a difficult time completing written composition assignments to fulfill the course requirement. Again, language backgrounds seem to play a role. Five out of six students (83%) with a strong background in English reported composition as a major difficulty, while only two out of nine (22%) Cantonese speakers viewed it as a problem. The interview with the students indicated that their facility with using Chinese characters is not the primary factor. Even though existing studies (e.g., Everson, 1996; Ke, 1996a, 1998; Packard, 1990) have revealed that recognizing and writing Chinese characters pose a potential difficulty for students with a strong background in English at the initial learning stages[5], characters were not a perceived problem for the students at the time of the present study. One possible explanation may be related to motivation. Character recognition and production is a time-consuming task (Everson, 1996, Ke, 1996a, 1998) that requires patience and effort. Those who have gone beyond the initial learning stage, as revealed by Wen's study (1997), are usually the highly motivated ones with appropriate expectations of learning tasks and had made tremendous effort to overcome some initial difficulties such as character learning. For the students in the present study, according to the interviews and the researcher's observation, all the students felt comfortable with the use of their characters, in terms of either recognition or production. Hanyu Pinyin was viewed as a very convenient tool when they encountered an unfamiliar character or when they needed a word that

[5] Ke's study (1998) reveals that language background did not have a meaningful effect on his students' performance in character recognition and production. However, the participants in his study only differ in terms of their exposure to oral languages: the heritage learners had been exposed to some form of Chinese orally and aurally at their homes, while the non-heritage learners did not have family members speaking any form of Chinese (Ke 1998:94). In terms of written Chinese, all of the participants in Ke's study should be viewed as being at the same level: first year CFL students from American universities who are strong in English and accustomed to phonetic writing.

they did not know how to write in characters for a composition assignment. Thus, it seems the non-native learners' problem with composition is not equivalent to their ability to read or write individual characters. A theory of language transfer might be applicable in this case: many of the L1 composing behaviors and strategies are L2 transferable both negatively and positively. Numerous studies in second language writing have provided evidence to support the theory of language transfer (e.g., Ting, 1996; Crerand, 1993; Green, 1991; Carson, 1990; Hall, 1990; Cumming, 1989; Arndt, 1987; Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1982; etc.). However, since there is no data on students' written compositions in either English or Chinese, whether or not the theory applies in this case remains an open question.

Coping strategies

Again, different students adopted different strategies to cope with their major difficulties in Chinese learning, depending on their learning styles and the way they perceive how a particular difficulty might hinder communication.

Tones. As revealed earlier, the students with a strong background in English experienced the problem with tones at the initial learning stages. How did they cope with it? The three different students who were interviewed approached the problem in three different ways.

S2, who was an engineering student, started learning Mandarin while he was traveling in China. For him, the concept of tones did not exist for quite some time:

> "For a long time, I wouldn't pay attention to the tones. For instance, you (I) listen to an American speaking (Chinese) without tones, I could understand exactly what he's saying."

So, his strategy was to "neglect" the mastery of tones (McGinnis 1997:228) and focus upon other features first. Thus, S2 first learned to speak some substandard Mandarin Chinese without tones. After overcoming other difficulties, he reports having gradually learned tones without making too much of an effort.

S3 started his Mandarin learning in Taiwan after he had already lived there for one year. So,

> "Although during the first year I didn't study Chinese, I still got used to the idea of tones... I think that helped me."

For S3, it was the concept of tones that helped him master the use of tones. So, unlike S2, S3 started speaking Chinese with tones in mind.

S1 started learning Chinese in the university. At first, she had no concept of tones, and could not tell the difference between syllables in different tones. But she practiced a lot with the help of her Chinese instructor. She reported that it was this practice that "helped establish the concept of tones", and the concept of tones made her progress faster.

From the above examples, it seems that there is a great variety in coping strategies, even among the students from the same language background. The difference in these three students' coping strategies might be caused by different personalities and academic majors. S2 was an engineering major who had a "take-it-easy" personality. He was learning Chinese as a pastime. Hence, he did not feel the need to be perfect in every thing at the initial learning stages. S1 and S3 were relatively more serious people, and they studied Chinese as their major. They wanted to understand everything about Chinese even at the beginning of the learning process and lexical tones are "one of the remarkable distinguishing qualities of the Chinese language" (McGinnis 1997:228). Although S1 started by practicing and S3 started by listening, to get the "concept of tones" was the common strategy both of them adopted.

Now, let us examine those Cantonese students who were still experiencing difficulty in tones at the time of the study. Throughout the interview, it was found that all those students, except the one whose major was Chinese, did not pay attention to their tones at all, although they insisted that tones were one of their major difficulties. The reason stated by the students was that

tones did not hinder communication too much in their eyes. Indeed, even though tones play a major role in Chinese semantics, the specific meaning of utterances in the Chinese language also depends very much on the context in which the utterances occur. It is often true that even though one may speak Mandarin Chinese without perfect tones, he still can make him/herself understood. One of the observed scenarios from the present study provided extra evidence to support the importance of context over accurate tones. When being involved in a formal oral debate on the topic of *World Wars* as part of the course requirement, a student with strong Cantonese background said

> *zhadan* (2-4) instead of *zhadan* (4-4) ("bomb" in standard Mandarin), and
>
> *shengming* (4-4) instead of *shengming* (1-2) ("declare" in standard Mandarin).

With the context provided by the topic and the surrounding oral text, the student made herself perfectly understood. *Zhadan* (2-4) was correctly understood by the audience as "bombs" and *shengming* (4-4) as "declare". Thus, it seems that the Cantonese students had legitimate reasons not to take tones so seriously from the perspective of using the language for communication. Though realizing that their problems with tones could readily impede the listener's comprehension, they did not feel the need to speak Mandarin Chinese with perfect tones at the time of the study.

The fact that people could manage to communicate relatively effectively in Chinese without 100% accurate use of the tones and that the students of CAL are aware of the limitations of tones for communication purposes has implications for CAL curriculum and instruction. CAL educators need to have a clearer and more realistic understanding of the functions of tones in the Chinese language so as to better adjust the time spent on and the strategies utilized helping students master tones. First, it would be unrealistic to expect the students to have 100% mastery of tones at the initial learning stage. Many students, especially those with no backgrounds in Chinese, need a long time to master the use of tones. Second, pedagogically, it would be unwise and ineffective to focus on correction of tones if the students do not see how more accurate use of tones would improve their use of Chinese for communication purposes. Students need to understand not only that tones are a remarkable distinguishing quality of the Chinese language, but also how inaccurate use of tones may impede a listener's comprehension. With an

understanding of the importance of an accurate use of tones, students might be more willing to overcome their problems with tones.

Pronunciation. By comparison with their attitude towards the tone problem, these Cantonese students took much more care about their pronunciation problems. The reason seemed to be that they thought an incorrect pronunciation could severely hinder communication:

> "I have difficulty in the *s* and *sh*. So I always have trouble to make people understand if I'm saying forty or fourteen in Mandarin."
>
> ---from an interview with S11

In Mandarin Chinese, fourteen is *shisi* while forty is *sishi*. But S11 pronounced both of them as *sisi* and accordingly she had difficulty making herself understood.

Believing that good pronunciation could result in more effective communication, all the students who had difficulty in pronunciation tried hard to overcome it. But the strategies they adopted were very limited. Table 3 is a summary of the result from the interview with six students about their strategies dealing with pronunciation problems.

Number of students	Types of strategies
4	1. taking notes after being corrected.
2	2. using the dictionary when reading
2	3. writing down Pinyin for every word when preparing to give a talk.

Table 3. Strategies adopted by the students to deal with pronunciation problems.

Among the three strategies listed in Table 3, only one student adopted all three. The other five students adopted just one of them. None of the students reported that they practiced pronunciation, though all of them agreed in principle that practice might be helpful if they had

time for it.

It is interesting that while many SLA researchers are not in favor of error correction (Chaudron 1985), those students interviewed for this study welcomed correction very much:

> "Correction won't get me to learn the correct pronunciation immediately, but it makes me realize I'm wrong. If I like, I'll work on it later."
> ---from an interview with S11

In fact, many of the students reported that one correction did not help, because they could forget it easily without practice. But after several times of being corrected, they could remember their mistake. That may explain why all the students welcomed pronunciation corrections from the teacher. This finding about pronunciation corrections is pedagogically significant. Even though for a second language learner at the initial stage, too much correction might increase anxiety and accordingly affect learning negatively, corrections might be very necessary for advanced learners, especially those who are willing to be corrected.

In summary, for pronunciation problems, though the students tried hard to solve them by using a dictionary and making use of corrections from the teacher, the strategies available or adopted were limited in general. While believing that pronunciation practice might help, most students felt too busy to practice anyway. Though the students felt that they had made a little progress through their efforts, pronunciation was still one of their major difficulties.

Composition. Composition was not reported as a major problem by those Cantonese students mainly because before they started learning Mandarin, they could already read and write a little in Chinese. But the students with a strong background in English did feel it was hard to write compositions. There might exist varied reasons for different people: some might not have come to the stage at which they could think and organize compositions effectively in Chinese while others might be weak writers even in their primary language. As for the strategies the students adopted to cope with their difficulty in composition writing, they varied among different

people. The interview with four students showed three approaches towards the problem:

Approach 1 (S2 and S3):

organize (outline) in English, write in Chinese.

Approach 2 (S1):

depending on the topic.

difficult topic: organize in English, write in Chinese.

easy topic: organize in Chinese, think in Chinese, write in Chinese.

Approach 3 (S6):

organize in English, write in English, translate into Chinese.

Unfortunately, due to the limitation of time and accessibility to students written work, no examination of the students' composition was conducted. It is difficult to establish if the different strategies adopted by different students relate to the students' proficiency level in Chinese writing. On the surface, S1 seemed to be the most advanced among the four students because she could sometimes compose an essay without using English. However, according to the instructor and the researcher's observation, she was the weakest among the four in spoken Chinese, though it is understood that speaking and writing in a second language do not necessarily reflect each other. To understand why there is such a difference among the approaches that the students adopted to cope with their composition difficulty, a more thorough and in-depth study is needed.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present study involves an examination of a group of students' major difficulties in Mandarin Chinese learning and the strategies adopted by the students to cope with them beyond the initial learning stages. Because the data was mainly obtained from questionnaires and interviews, there are limitations in some findings, especially the causes of the difficulties and the coping strategies the students adopted. There is the possibility that the actual number of the strategies adopted is more than that reported since the students might use some strategies unconsciously. But to verify this, an empirical study with some other research methodology is necessary.

From the present study, it seems that depending on a number of variables such as language backgrounds, motivations, personalities, and attitudes, different students may experience different difficulties in learning Mandarin as an additional language and adopt different coping strategies. An awareness of this may help a teacher diagnose the students' language learning difficulties more effectively and accordingly provide more effective instruction. The present study also raises further questions in addition to those related to composition for future research:

1. What are the real obstacles that prevent students from overcoming some of the difficulties (e.g., pronunciation problem for Cantonese students) no matter how hard students may try?
2. Are there any strategies in addition to the ones adopted by the students in this study that can help students overcome their difficulties more efficiently?

The answers to these questions will surely benefit both the teacher and the students in their effort to teach and learn Mandarin Chinese beyond the initial stages.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire for the preliminary study.

Name:
Sex:
Age (if you don't mind):

1. What is your first language (native language or the language you speak with your parents at home)?
2. How long have you been learning Mandarin?
3. Where did you start your learning of Mandarin?
4. Could you speak a little Mandarin before you started learning?
5. Could you read in Chinese before you started learning?
6. What is your final goal of learning Mandarin? (Please circle)
   a. to have oral communication with people speaking Mandarin.
   b. to use Mandarin in future career.
   c. as a tool to study Chinese culture.
   d. others. Please specify:
7. What do you think is the most important Mandarin skill you should get?
   a. listening and speaking in daily life.
   b. listening and speaking academically.
   c. reading and writing for enjoyment.
   d. reading and writing academically.
   e. others. Please specify:
8. What do you think is the most difficult part in learning Mandarin? (You may use 1, 2, 3, to indicate the level of difficulty. 1 means the most difficult.)
   a. pronunciation.
   b. tone.
   c. grammar.
   d. writing Chinese characters.
   e. vocabulary enlargement.
   f. oral communication.
   g. giving a talk.
   h. composition

I. others. Please specify:

Appendix 2. A Guideline for the interview.

1. What do you think is the easiest part in Mandarin learning?
2. What is your problem with tones (or pronunciations, or composition, or...)?
3. Why do you think _____ is the most difficult?
4. How do you cope with your difficulty?
5. Do you care about your incorrect tones (or pronunciations, or ...)? Why?
6. What is most helpful for you to make improvement?
7. Have you made any improvement?